

Changes brewing in House plan

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BATON ROUGE

Numerous requests for changes in the House redistricting plan proposed by Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, led to the cancellation of a planned committee meeting today to review it.

Instead, the House and Governmental Affairs Committee is scheduled to take up Tucker's House Bill 1 at 9 a.m. Wednesday and it would be debated Friday on the House floor.

Behind the scenes, several lawmakers upset with the way HB1 shifts their districts are proposing amendments to the bill. But every time one change is made, a ripple effect affects other districts, so it takes time for the House staff to work up impact figures and maps.

Rep. James Armes, D-Leesville, met with Tucker at 1:30 p.m. Monday, asking him to alter the proposed District 25. His first choice would be to revert to an earlier draft of Tucker's bill that creates a fourth minority district in Shreveport, which would not greatly alter his district.

As it is, he would be forced to compete with Rep. Chris Roy, D-Alexandria in a district that spans parts of Rapides and Vernon parishes and is more heavily populated in Rapides, giving Roy an advantage.

"Everything's still kind of at a standstill," Armes said after the meeting. "He said, 'I don't see how I can do that.'"

Armes said he doesn't understand why not when the Shreveport minority district was a definite part of Tucker's plan until he presented an altered version Monday.

"I've got nothing against Chris Roy," Armes said. "I just want to do what's fair."

The problem, he said, is that the proposed district has 20,000 people in Vernon Parish, traditionally his base, but 10,000 of those people are soldiers at Fort Polk who don't vote in the district. Soldiers are

registered to vote in their home cities, counties or parishes, which puts him at a disadvantage in a race against Roy.

Armes said he proposed an alternative that would take DeRidder from state Rep. Frank Howard, R-Many, and give him a larger piece of Vernon Parish.

He said Tucker is looking into it.

Roy has questioned why the change was made from him running against Republican Nowlin in the original version to having to run against Armes, his friend and fellow Democrat.

"I hope it's not politically motivated to do away with a Democratic seat," Armes said. "I'm not going to take this lying down. Most of this had to do with Rick Nowlin not wanting to run against Chris Roy."

Nowlin said he's not much better off in the

proposed new district. Although he's not scheduled to run against an incumbent, he lives right on the edge of the district, making it wide open for challengers.

Armes said Nowlin is "cooked no matter where he goes."

If Tucker does not reinstate a fourth minority district in Shreveport, an issue that has divided the city's black lawmakers, Gallot said he will push legislation introduced Monday that would do it.

He said that without it, the U.S. Department of Justice might reject the whole plan under the Voting Rights Act.

"If we want a better shot at preclearance, that would be necessary," he said.

Most members of the Legislative Black Caucus want the new district. State Rep. Barbara Norton,

D-Shreveport, is the key holdout, saying she is concerned that taking minority voters out of her district to develop another one weakens the certainty of a minority winning either election.

Tucker said in committee that he shares that opinion.

Roy said Monday that state Rep. John Bel Edwards, chairman of the Democratic Caucus, will offer amendments to HB1 to create the Shreveport district.

If the district is created, it would impact several other districts, and possibly result in a Nowlin-Roy contest.